01 Why worship?

Readings: Genesis 1: 24-2:4; Acts 17: 22-28; St John 4: 21-26.
Psalm 95: 1-7 (or CH4 20)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

During the winter, with Chaplaincy services and special events cropping up fairly regularly, there are very few opportunities to have a series of connected sermons; so for these next few weeks we are going to depart from our usual lectionary readings, and bearing in mind the alterations that are being made to our building, we are going to think about different components of worship. What are we doing when we assemble here on Sunday mornings? What are the beliefs that ought to be reflected in our building? What is the function of the different parts of worship – Scripture, prayer and music? We have talked in a general way about "new opportunities" and "greater flexibility" being central to the effort that has gone into the Appeal; in the coming months we are going to have to work out what these things mean and how we can use our sacred building most effectively.

The proper starting point for that, though, is not how to re-arrange the nuts and bolts of services. The last twenty years have seen a great many attempts to renew the life of the Church by trying to move straight to quick answers – introducing bouncy, easily-learned choruses, wheeling on a few guitars, using a dwindling Youth Fellowship to lead the prayers. These things in themselves are superficial answers, often more indicative of desperation than of any deepening spiritual awareness. The right answers can only emerge when the right questions are being asked; and unless there has been some preliminary staking out of the ground to establish the parameters of what we are doing, the best way forward is going to be very difficult to find. So today, by way of introduction, we reflect on what this strange phenomenon called worship is – on why we are here and what we are doing together.

This is not such a simple question as it sounds. If we conducted a straw poll among Church members and asked them "Why do you come?", I imagine we would get a lot of different answers. Some would say they get strength for the next week, others that they find religion a great help, others that they meet their friends here, others that they don't "feel right" unless they've been to church. But I doubt if a large proportion would include in their answer any direct mention of God or of Christ. We tend to justify worship either in terms of what we receive from it, or – especially if we're talking about young people – in terms of moral education and improvement. A lot of parents who never go to church themselves are keen that their children should attend a Sunday School, "to learn the difference between right and wrong"; and since they feel that they themselves have learned that difference long ago, they don't see any point in going to church.

On the face of things, the Bible has surprisingly little to say about what worship is, or why we should engage in it; just as the Bible has surprisingly little to say about the existence of God. Both things are assumed all the way through; and our belief in the supreme importance of worship as a human activity goes right back to our reading from Genesis – "God created man in his own image.... male and female he created them ... and God blessed them". Out of all the creatures that he made, we human beings alone are capable of knowing our Maker and communicating with him. The faculty of worship is part of the distinctiveness of being human – being made for relationship with God. That famous opening of the Shorter Catechism got it exactly right when it asked "What is the chief end of man", expecting every school child in the land to be able to answer "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy

him". Worship is the giving of glory – of worth-ship – to the God on whom we utterly depend for everything, the God who has made our universe and given us the gift of life. Whatever benefits we may legitimately hope that it will have for our behaviour and our outlook and our living, it is not chiefly for our own good that we come. In the words of the traditional Communion service, We lift up our hearts and we give thanks to our Lord God, because it is meet and right so to do. Worship requires no justification other than that. To worship is to make affirmations about our humanity, as well as affirmations about God. Conversely, not to worship – or to worship an unworthy God – is to fall below the fullness of being human.

And this is, surely, why the Bible has so much to say about false gods and idols. All the way through, it assumes that worship is a universal human instinct – so the question it addresses is not "What is the point of worship?" That would have seemed as pointless to the writers of the Old Testament as asking "What is the point of eating or breathing or sleeping?" The relevant question is "Which God are we going to worship?" In the prophets' day the challenge came from carved images and nature gods and pagan shrines. Now, idolatry is often focussed on objects or people that are not explicitly religious – celebrities, technology, horoscopes, money. Think of the thousands who committed suicide in Russia when they heard that Stalin had died. In its most debased form, the religious instinct can latch on to something as remote from the Creator God as the bottle or the hypodermic. That which we worship is that which ultimately means most to us. Even the most hardened cynic and the most dependant drop-out put their faith in something. The very faculty that gives us human beings a status just a little lower than the angels is the one that makes it possible for human beings to be degraded in a way no animal could ever be.

When we come together on a Sunday – and perhaps in future on a weekday too – and lift up our hearts to God, we are engaging in what Karl Barth once called "the most momentous, most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human lives". As soon as we are called to worship, a curtain is rolled back and a celebration begins; and this applies whether we are having a big formal 11 o'clock service or a smaller gathering in Lady Yester's Aisle. Either way, we are worshipping as one tiny part of the whole Church. Numbers aren't the most important thing. It would be lovely to have all our members with us, still better to have others who aren't members yet of any church; but worship doesn't derive its validity from the number of people taking part in it. Worship is being offered to God perpetually, the whole time. All we can do is add our little contribution.

The content and the setting and the atmosphere of worship matter very much. Either they will open up windows on the light that shines from God, or they will cramp our thinking and restrict our vision. It is natural for people to want hymns they know and love, and services that they can understand; the trouble is that services that are completely understandable to 12-year-olds may seem completely banal to people in their 70s. Christ's great gift as a teacher was that he was able to express big things in simple ways – but they were ways that still left room for growth and mystery. So a child can "understand" the Lost Sheep or the Prodigal Son – but not on the same level as the 70-year-old does. We keep finding more and more layers beneath what we thought we already knew. And worship should have something of that same effect. All the classic great prayers of the Church have something of that combination of simplicity with depth. If there is no mystery, no sense of more to be discovered, it is no wonder people think they would be better just to wash the car or cut the grass; and one of the chief ways I believe the Church is failing at the moment is in trying to scale down God and worship to the level of our instant understanding. Every service of the Church should have a feeling of significance about it; and since God is so much greater and

more glorious than our awareness of him, it is maybe healthier that we should leave church scratching our heads, wondering, and feeling stretched, than glowing with a certainty of simply having had our own ideas, our partial knowledge, reinforced.

To the God who is beyond our minds to grasp – the Father who created us, the Son who has redeemed us, and the Spirit who inspires us and deepens our faith now – be glory, praise and honour through the Church's worship, always. Amen.

Rev David M Beckett